Emotional Growth Through Musical Play

by Mary Stouffer

Music is a wonderful art form that encompasses all areas of child development: physical, intellectual, social and emotional. From as early as four months, the fetus is able to hear outside musical stimuli. Whether the mother is listening to Mozart or Alannis Morisette, musical development has begun. This article focuses on emotional development through music for several reasons. Firstly, emotional development is a part of child development that generally does not attract much attention; it is a difficult area to study in babies but a crucial part of human development. Secondly, music is an art form that often communicates emotion. And thirdly, music is a natural medium for young children.

Psychologists have long been aware that early communication between parent and child is extremely important in developing the child's capacity of communication and awareness of others. This encourages social behaviour and interest in other people. The lullaby is a parent's song of love, comfort and security. It is accompanied by the physical and emotional closeness between parent and baby, which are just as important as the tranquil melody. The mother holds the baby in her arms and commences to move in a soothing rocking motion. The physical contact between parent and baby, the stimulation of the ear, the creation of a positive emotional mood and the physical rocking motion stimulate many of the baby's senses and in turn, encourage brain development.

Motivated to communicate by her mother's comforting voice, a baby responds by crying, cooing and babbling. Research shows that the more frequently a baby is sung to, the more utterances and verbal sounds she produces. The baby not only likes to be sung to, but is very interested in and enjoys her own vocalizing.

The lullaby is a direct and powerful emotional catalyst for communication and bonding between parent and child. Its simple beauty and emotional context has even inspired great composers like Schubert and Brahms.

Nursery rhymes, finger and toe plays and tickling games are the young child's musical repertoire. True children's games that evoke an emotional response are perfect examples of art in a child's world. Art involves tension and climax. A movement of a sonata by Beethoven has similar emotional development to a simple child's game. It has the same artistic structure and value as a true children's game: beginning -> tension builds -> climax -> resolution.

Many of you know the following tickling game:

    Round and round the garden
    (Adult draws a circle on baby's palm.)
    Like a teddy bear,
    One step, two step
    (Adult walks two fingers up baby's arm.)
    Tickley under there!
(Adult tickles baby under the arm.)

Through the game, the physical human contact between adult and child creates a close feeling.

The touch, physical closeness and facial expressions exchanged between the adult and child are similar to the interaction when singing a lullaby. As the rhyme progresses and the adult's fingers "walk" up the child's arm, the child starts to feels the anticipation of the tickle and grows more excited. When the climax of the tickle is experienced, an emotional high occurs. Repetition of this short game initially helps the child to become involved and also helps to create a mood. When the game is repeated as many times as the child would like, the emotional response grows stronger each time. When the child has had enough, the games reaches an end and the child relaxes, reaching a point of satisfaction.

Bouncing rhymes have a greater appeal for older babies. Being jostled on an adults lap is stimulating to the inner ear and the sense of balance and develops the child's sense of physicality.

One, two, three,
(Baby is facing adult, sitting on the lap. Adult bounces baby to the beat of the rhyme.)
Baby's on my knee,
Rooster crows,
And away she goes!
(Adult gently "drops" baby backwards through the legs.)

This is a much more active game but the emotional climax will develop in a similar fashion to the tickling game. The beginning of the rhyme moves to the line of anticipation "Rooster crows", and climaxes with the drop "And away she goes!" The baby will experience a deep feeling of joy with the repetition of the game.

Babies and young children are reliant on their caregivers to give them these playful and joyous experiences. Emotional development is far too important to leave to chance. Parents and caregivers need to access the most artistic rhymes and games in the folk repertoire, use their own voices and their own touch to give babies deep emotional experiences.

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